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# CIA Predicts Increase in Contra Aid

## Effectiveness of Nicaraguan Rebels Termed Improved

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WASHINGTON—In a new expansion of its covert war against Nicaragua's leftist regime, the Central Intelligence Agency has raised the ceiling on the number of Nicaraguan rebels it is willing to support from 15,000 to 18,000, U.S. officials say.

The CIA informed Congress last week that it expects the rebel groups it is aiding to continue growing with new recruits, including a 3,000-man increase in strength that may come soon with the defection of an entire Nicaraguan army unit, one official said.

The "personnel ceiling" figure is apparently part of an official description of the covert program that must be presented to congressional intelligence committees as part of a requirement that they be kept informed.

The rebels, known in Nicaragua as *contras*, fielded only a few hundred armed men before they began receiving U.S. funding in 1982 but grew swiftly to reach an estimated 9,000 men last year and an estimated 15,000 now.

### More Open Support

At the same time, as the rebels have mounted ever more effective attacks against Nicaragua's ports and military outposts, the Reagan Administration has begun expressing support for their efforts more openly, although the material aid and advice provided by the CIA remains officially secret.

Secretary of State George P. Shultz said Sunday that the rebellion was created by the Sandinista regime's own repression, "and they're having to live with it." Under Secretary of Defense Fred C. Ikle publicly praised the rebels for tying up Nicaragua's army in counterinsurgency operations. "The military in Managua are under some pressure because of it, and consequently they pose less of a threat to their neighbors," Ikle said last week.

The increased U.S. backing for the rebels has come amid a guerrilla offensive in northern Nicaragua and a series of seaborne attacks on the country's ports apparently intended to cripple its ability to import weaponry and oil.

Seven merchant ships have been damaged by mines planted by the rebels in harbors on both the Pacific and Caribbean coasts, including a

Japanese freighter and a Soviet oil tanker struck two weeks ago.

The Managua regime has reacted by seeking aid from the Soviet Union, Iran and Libya, but with little apparent success so far, Central American diplomats said. Nicaraguan Defense Minister Humberto Ortega also threatened to mine the ports of other Central American countries in retaliation, but the United States privately warned against such action and promised to send mine sweepers to the area if needed, the diplomats said.

"It's still full speed ahead," one U.S. official said of the Administration's commitment to aiding rebel operations.

U.S. officials say the increased military pressure is aimed at weakening the Sandinistas both militarily and politically and, ultimately, forcing them to make concessions both to their domestic opposition and to the pro-U.S. governments of other Central American nations.

"It's an incentive for the Nicaraguan government to move in the direction of reasonableness, both domestically and internationally," said a senior Administration official who spoke on condition that he not be identified.

"It also has the positive effect of giving the unarmed opposition the sense that there is still an open historical possibility" of change in Nicaragua's form of government, he said. "It keeps the question of a democratic political future open."

Since January, most of the spotlight—and, apparently, much of the CIA funding—has gone to the smaller Democratic Revolutionary Alliance, a Costa Rica-based group led by Eden Pastora, the disaffected Sandinista guerrilla hero known as Commander Zero.

It was Pastora's organization that mined the Nicaraguan harbors at El Bluff on the Caribbean coast and Corinto on the Pacific—operations that reportedly required CIA help in obtaining expensive high-speed boats, mines and detailed planning.

It is also Pastora's group that has attracted the most new recruits recently and that hopes to persuade an entire Nicaraguan army unit of 3,000 men to defect, a well-placed U.S. official said.

Some Administration officials have said that they consider the charismatic Pastora a greater political threat to the Managua regime than the leaders of the larger Nicaraguan Democratic Force. Some members of the latter group were associated with the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza, who was toppled by the Sandinistas in a popular revolution in 1979.

The Administration revealed its new "ceiling" of 18,000 rebels in the course of closed-door hearings before the congressional committees on intelligence, sources said. The committees are considering an Administration request for \$21 million more in funding for the secret program, in addition to a reported \$64 million already spent since 1982—a figure that has never been confirmed.

The procedure of setting a personnel ceiling appears to be a new approach by the Administration to keeping the covert program under control as the number of *contras* has risen. Up until about a year ago, no limit was set as the buildup was under way, according to one official.